

PLANTS THAT CAUSE Itching

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Eastern Poison Ivy (Toxicodendron radicans)

Photo by Robert H. Mohlenbrock @

USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / USDA SCS. 1991. Southern wetland flora: Field office guide to plant species. South National Technical Center, Fort Worth, TX.

Alabama is a diverse state with numerous plants, all of which have value and importance to the ecosystem. However, some of the plants are undesirable or even harmful to humans. Almost any plant may produce hay fever or skin rash in an allergic individual, but there are a small number of plants that cause an irritating itch to most anyone who comes into contact with them. Three of these are native to Alabama: poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac.

Poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac are closely related. All three are quite common and widely distributed in various growth situations such as

hedgerows, thickets, woods, fields, and roadsides. Everyone active in the outdoors should learn to recognize these plants because they are sources of human discomfort. Poison ivy and poison oak are usually easily recognized, but poison sumac is more difficult. Poison sumac is most common in natural thickets and swampy habitat.

During early fall the leaves of all three plants can be red or orange. The leaves vary greatly in size, texture, and degree of "incutting" along the margin, apparently depending on habitat conditions to some degree. Remember that poison oak is woody in older plants and that each leaf is divided into three leaflets. Poison sumac is a tall shrub or small tree. Each leaf is composed of seven to eleven leaflets arranged oppositely along the mid-view, terminating with one leaflet at the tip. Poison ivy is a vine almost always climbing, and rarely found resting on the ground.

The tissue fluid of all three plants contains poi-



Atlantic Poison Oak (Toxicodendron pubescens)

Photo by Robert H. Mohlenbrock @ USDA-

NRCS PLANTS Database / USDA SCS. 1991. Southern wetland flora: Field office guide to plant species. South National Technical Center, Fort Worth, TX.

sonous oil. This oil is found in all parts of the plant and is extremely irritating to the skin. The oil does not vaporize at normal temperatures, so contact with the plant must occur to produce a reaction. However, an exception to this rule does occur: severe cases of poison ivy and oak have been contracted from the droplets of oil in the smoke debris of the plants when burned.

Once in contact, the oil adheres to the skin. It can be removed by washing well with a strong soap as soon as practical after contact (within five or ten minutes if possible). Otherwise, some skin reaction may have already taken place. If a rash develops, the blisters and red itching skin can be treated with dressings of calamine lotion, Epsom salts, or baking soda. Severe cases may need medical treatment.

The best way to cope with these plants is to learn to recognize them and stay away from them. ☹



Poison Sumac (Toxicodendron vernix)

Photo by Norman Melvin @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database